



THE COUNCIL FOR INDUSTRY AND HIGHER EDUCATION

League tables and other lies...

Pity poor Ian Watmore the Permanent Secretary of the Department for Innovation Universities and Skills (DIUS). He made a not unreasonable joke at a recent meeting of the Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE) about his Department only having been around for a few months yet already there were four universities in the top ten. But he was then immediately savaged by a pack of Vice-Chancellors and business leaders. Why?

The arguments are simple:

- the methodologies of all league tables are often deeply flawed; efforts may have been made to improve them but any table that puts Stanford and the LSE some way down the rankings immediately loses credibility;
- the UK may well have the second best system of higher education in the world, but to boast about this when we invest so little in our HE system is to score an own goal in the dialogue with the Treasury; we do fantastically well considering the inadequate funding in the system but need world-class levels of investment if we are truly to sustain a world-class system of higher education;
- overseas readers of league tables think they carry some credibility and are influenced by them; so if a university appears low down a table, then investment contracts can be lost, potential students and their parents put off, and the UK arms of multinational businesses placed on the defensive in having to explain to their HQ why contracts have been let to university A rather than university B;
- most important of all, league tables erect hierarchies rather than valuing diversity; the CIHE welcomes the excellence that resides in a wide range of universities and colleges; excellence in widening participation is just as valuable as excellence in research; excellence in engaging with local communities and with small businesses is just as vital as engaging with multinational businesses.

So what can we all do about what some see understandably as pernicious and dangerous league tables?

First, every academic should cease lauding their own institution's performance when it happens to suit them. Fine to learn the views of real students; but to quote artificial constructs when it suits their own short-term aims is to give these tables a credibility they do not deserve. In any case, student blog sites and face-books and other media are the ways students really compare universities nowadays. League tables can just confuse them and over-influence their parents.

Second, sophisticated businesses know where the internationally excellent relevant research resides; league tables just lead astray small businesses and those who know no better; universities should have better points of access and better internal communications so that small businesses and others can better find out how an institution can help them in practice solve a business problem.

Third, we should welcome the work that the Higher Education Funding Council for England is undertaking on league tables and their methodologies and await the results.

Finally, we should never lose an opportunity to correct all who talk about our "top universities"; we should continue to stress the vitality and excellence that comes from diversity; that diversity is the true strength of our UK system of higher education.

Richard Brown is Chief Executive of the CIHE www.cihe-uk.com He writes here in a personal capacity.

The Council for Industry
and Higher Education
Studio 11, Tiger House
Burton Street, London
WC1H 9BY

Tel: 020 7383 7667
Fax: 020 7383 3433
Email: cihe@cihe-uk.com
Web: www.cihe-uk.com

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